



The "Here" Atlas

If you could make a “Map of the Present,” what would it look like? Chances are (no matter your life experience, age or cultural background) it would depict an intersection of where you’re going and where you’ve been. Signposts wouldn’t have place-names, but would describe a more internal state, akin to a speech bubble dangling over someone’s head in a comic strip. One might read, “Mom would have liked it here—the sunshine is so pleasant!” or “I don’t much care for lico-rice tea today.” The more honest, and personal, your Present, the easier it would be for others to relate to it. After all, who could refute you? And the great thing is, once you’d gotten to a point in your life where you’d accrued lots of context (life experience) you’d have a richer, more panoramic

terrain to traverse. Walking through your “map” would be like walking through something universal, like a legend, or a poem. If you told it right.

Viviane Rombaldi Seppey makes works at the intersection between geography and memory, and in the process, she finds herself transported to the here and now. Proust would have had a lot to say about the “place-names” she chooses to have remain in these delicately sliced-out maps, especially the elegant-sounding coastal towns in Europe like Valencia and Cannes; John Heartfield would admire her graphic sensibility, the way she mixes human bodies and places with more than a little sense of humor; and Ibsen might have taken her installation *My Father Was a Builder* as an illustration for his famous play *The Master Builder* – what with its

many “map”-bricks lying in a heap beneath an architecturally crisp display of pencil renderings. It’s hard to say whether these structures might one day get created from those bricks, or whether they are buildings from which all the world’s bricks have just recently crumbled.

The works you see here all use as their original source material maps that are quite special to the artist – culled as they are from her late father’s archives. Some were discovered by Rombaldi Seppey herself at her home in Sion, Switzerland, the town not far from the French border where she grew up; others were given to her later by family members from their own collections after they learned of Rombaldi Seppey’s profound interest in them. Ernest Rombaldi was a builder who had a construction business that he inherited from his father before him, an Italian who emigrated to Switzerland from Belluno in 1906. Though Mr. Rombaldi earned his living creating permanent structures, traveling was his passion, and his map collection was extensive and well used. Rombaldi Seppey, who’s worked in New York City for nine years now, has continued his fascination with things near and far, exacting and free, spicing up that duality with some of her own diverging talents: an almost scientific exactitude when it comes to process and a childlike, open-minded sense of experimentation with new materials. Rombaldi Seppey, you feel, could make almost anything, from anything, if she gave herself the time, and set her mind to it.

No matter their medium, Rombaldi Seppey’s works always seem to radiate a kind of meditative quietude underscored with an undercurrent of relentless curiosity. *Nurture* (2013), a mid-sized work on paper, gives us an eyeball-like giant breast with a nipple at its center where the pupil should be, “weeping” a strait from the Tasman Sea into the Pacific Ocean. *Wait and See* (2013), a similar work with a surreal bent, depicts a map of where Rombaldi Seppey would eventually end up, Manhattan, leaving only the street grid of the city exposed – save for a toothy skull fragment where Harlem should be. And then there is my favorite, a series of soft paper vessels called *Un*

Monde en Soi made of interwoven map strips that you can hold in the palm of your hand. Their shapes and woven construction evoke utilitarian ethnographic objects like the tribal baskets of the Western Plains. Yet, as their title translates, each is a “world in itself”—only a topsy-turvy one in which continents like North and South America overlap, Turkey is woven over Halifax and the Canary Islands are inches from Mexico.

It feels good to squeeze these little baskets and feel their lightness – to hear them respond with a little creaky sound somewhat like putting an old leather sandal on your foot. Each vessel is a small victory over the gravitas of what is always going on across the globe. Rombaldi Seppey’s works are ultimately places where the sensual triumphs over order. And where the expected gets injected with more than a little playful fun.

But let’s return to our bodily location once more: just who are we as physical entities, within the ever-moving present? Rombaldi Seppey, who told me she is “fascinated by the complexities of human anatomy” as much as she delights in places and things asks that question quite a lot, employing illustrations from *Gray’s Anatomy* almost as much as she uses her dad’s old atlases. Everywhere, highways turn into arteries (there’s a pun there) and the borders of Italian towns into something more like ganglia and nerve endings than resorts. *Earth Beat* (2010) features a dangling, pendulous shape, bloodred, like a human heart that’s been removed of its muscle and left with only spidery thin veins. Likewise for *The New World* (2013) that positions the optic nerve and exposed eye muscles over stylized waves of the Mediterranean Sea. Maybe there’s a reason why the eye is the organ Rombaldi Seppey chooses to mix most frequently with her maps. It’s as though the terrains want to show us the way to looking inside ourselves.

On a recent trip to Rombaldi Seppey’s studio, seeing all these anatomical diagrams recast, I was reminded of a misconception of the human body that I formed as a child—and

which I still carry with me, in a fashion. I was fascinated by anatomy diagrams, and often pored over them in books. One day, in the library, I came across a particularly richly illustrated volume that separated out its full-color images into discrete, awe-inspiring pages: The Digestive System; The Circulatory System; The Nervous System... I found them so complex and different, I assumed each person could only have one in their body. (I eventually settled on the nervous system as probably being closest to my body type.) I was wrong, of course, but that misconception has spoken to me to this day as being partly true, or at least sort of poetic, for a couple of reasons: A) All systems, no matter how seemingly accurate and scientific, are fictions – just one person’s way of depicting a world that is greater than their

own understanding at one point in time; and B) the way you depict your world may not be the way I draw mine – and that’s okay.

There’s also a third, intuitive, conclusion I’ve come to here, and I think that visiting this show of Rombaldi Seppey’s has helped me make it: We are all ultimately mysteries, even to ourselves; or to put it another way: it’s the places in the heart that are most worth exploring.

When you find a way to get there, draw a map, let us know? It will give us the courage to follow.

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